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OF BORDERS, DEATH, AND FOOTPRINTS

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ABSTRACT

Artikel ini memperbincangkan ambiguitas dan instabilitas makna 'batas' dan 'identitas'. Batas, yang awalnya adalah metafora dari paradigma ruang dalam rangka menetapkan dan mengatur perbedaan, akhirnya cenderung menjadi cerita pembekuan dan pemisahan. Melalui telaah atas beberapa novel dan pemikiran filsafat mutakhir, dibahaslah batas dan identitas sebagai permanensi mental yang justru menimbulkan alienasi, juga sebagai kerinduan yang tak pernah terpenuhi dan sebagai pergumulan hegemoni. Lantas pada penghujung artikel ini identitas dilihat bukan sebagai garis pembatas akhir, melainkan sebagai garis depan yang senantiasa terbuka pada kemungkinan baru.

Key Words:
•*Border* •*Identity* •*Ossification* •*Volatility* •*Instability* •*Unfulfilment* •*Hegemonic struggle* •*Photograph* •*Footprints* •*Limiting sign* •*Frontier*

In the streets of the world, there is always a stranger. She is the one whom we meet, who walks with us and probably lives among us, or even lives within us, since, as the Book of Leviticus says, we were once strangers.

A stranger is by definition an unidentifiable entity. At a crucial moment, however, a stranger is transformed into something else; she becomes a foreigner. It is the moment of inclusion and exclusion; it is the moment when the border is pronounced.

Border is a concept, or a metaphor, generated by a paradigm of space. In practice, borders are made as markers. As markers are signs, geography becomes sites or/and communities where space is intertwined with time, practices, and power. After all, 'places are marked, noted, named,' as Lefebvre in his magisterial work, *The Production of Space,* puts it.[1]

Border as a narrative of ossification and death

In the beginning was the body. Space, as Lefebvre points out, may then be marked physically. Animals use smells the way human groups use visual or auditory indicators to rediscover a place. In the very earliest stage of organized society, people marked particular locations and indicated routes by means of blazes. Ultimately, space may be marked with abstraction, 'by means of discourse, by means of signs.' One of modernity's achievement is the birth of intelligible social zones.

The drive for intelligibility, or better, readibility, has its own history. In Lefebvre's thesis,[2] it is 'the intense onslaught of visualization' in the production of social space that impels it. This takes place when a space is produced in which 'the eye of God', or of the 'Father', or of 'the Leader' lays hold of whatever serves its purpose, bringing about 'a space of force, of violence, of power restrained by nothing but the limitations of its means'.[3]

Parallel to it, the pronouncement of borders, like other main thrusts of modernity, entails the conversion of time into space. It stabilizes and regulates difference on, as it were, a flat surface. It makes difference no longer something radically exterior to any representation, no longer a quality that is always yet to come and whose absence conditions the possibility of meaning.

Border thus assumes a certain degree of constancy, abolishes the dynamics of difference, and rejects the strangeness of the stranger, by making her a 'foreigner' – as well as fortifies one's identity.

As such, it embodies a specular role. It is analogous to the 'mirror stage' in Lacan's thesis on the birth of the subject: as a child, one (mis)-recognizes

in his/her mirror image as a stable, coherent, whole self. It is 'this Gestalt,' as Lacan puts it, that 'symbolizes the mental permanence of the I'the production of 'the mental permanence of the '[4] is comparable to the act of naming. It is interesting that the Bible describes naming as a decisive moment of creation. God sets man free through language and gives man the power to name the animals. Adam assumes a creative role, just as God did, through words.

But naming turns out to be an ambivalent undertaking. On the one hand, it attempts to grasp the enigma of the singular. It tries to prevent things from being transposed into mere concepts or numbers or items of classification. On the other hand, to name is to inaugurate an identity; it ossifies things out of difference, which is essentially a movement of, in Adorno's word, 'non-identity'. In entering the symbolic order, naming betrays our desire for presence or any kind of finality.

This is because a name, like my name when I was a child, is always given under a set of certain linguistic and cultural systems. This is the core of Lacan's argument: an identity, so conferred, is formed by others. One may believe him/herself to be a sovereign individual, but an individual is determined by a symbolic order structured around *le nom du père* (the name of the father) – words phonetically almost indistinguishable from *le non du père* (the father's no).

The story of borders is therefore a narrative of naming and ossification, and perhaps also of death. To illustrate the point, let me discuss a couple of novels written in two different eras and about two different places.

Stories of Border

The first begins in the city of Baku, capital of Azerbaijan, in a classroom at the Imperial Russian Humanistic High School, at the turn of the 20th century. One hot afternoon, this is what a geography teacher, a Russian professor has to say to his students:

'Some scholars look on the area south of the Caucasian mountains as belonging to Asia, while others…believe that this country should be considered part of Europe. It can therefore be said, my children, that it is partly your responsibility as to whether our town should belong to progressive Europe or to reactionary Asia.'

It is a mixed lot, this classroom: among them 30 Muslims, four Armenians, two Poles, and one Russian.

Then, one student, Ali Khan Shirvanshir, raises his hand: 'Sir, I…would rather stay in Asia.'

Thus begins *Ali and Nino*, a novel by Kurban Said.[5] That this is a pseudonym is well-known. But when the work was first published in German in 1937, the very strangeness of that name prompted one critic to suggest that the author was a Tartar who died in Italy.[6] The novel recounts the adventures of a young Muslim aristocrat, Ali Khan Shirvanshir, who falls in love with an Armenian Christian princess, Nino Kipiani, at school in the oil rich city of Baku. The tension begins as the youngsters mould themselves into becoming staunch supporters of their respective communities.

Many critics have pronounced the novel a gem, hailing it, predictably, as the 20th century *Romeo and Juliet*, even if towards the end Ali does end up marrying Nino. One of the blurbs quotes *The New York Times Book Review* describing it 'like an epic poem.' A reviewer for the Cairo-based newspaper *Al-Ahram* called it 'a masterpiece of Orientalist literature.' When republished in 2000, the novel became a 'national novel,' a kind of unofficial national saga of Azerbaijan.[8]

The novel's strengths do shine through: a refined prose, a clear structure, beautifully ornate like a piece of *art nouveau* – all of which are not inconsiderable underpinnings. But, to me, *Ali and Nino* is still a hugely flawed work. It is flawed both at the basics, and by a basic predictability. That which is normally present in a moving love story – an interior – is missing. For the story is, at its heart, not about love between persons, but about readable identity, shaped by a demarcation. Everything is fixed between two geographic entities and two personal histories. Starting with a lecture on the geography of Baku, it ends with the death of the hero in a battle to defend the city from a Russian invasion. The characters are constructed merely as a replay of a narrative strategy of narcissism at the border of self and non-self, of 'us' and 'them.'

That border – that overriding border of pretty much everything else in the 20th century is between 'Asia' and 'Europe.' It is anything but an objective geographical line. It entails an emotional investment. As Lefebvre describes it, it hints at 'an affective charge'[9] such as fear, disdain, attraction, or nostalgia. Time and again it is a site of anxieties and strain.

It has also survived *Ali and Nino.* More than 50 years later, Orhan Pamuk's *Snow,* published in 2002, restates the anguish. It is significant that Pamuk presents it with difference -- like a necessary cliché that is both sad and funny, as when he tells us of an unnamed teen-ager reading a curious poem to a gathering of Turks:

Europe, O Europe
Let's stop and take a look
When we're together in our dreams
Let's not let the devil have his way

But what is 'Asia', and what is 'Europe'? When we check the *Encyclopædia Britannica's* entry on 'Asia'; it is, as it were, a spark *différance:*

> The name Asia is ancient, and its origin has been variously explained. The Greeks used it to designate the lands situated to the east of their homeland. It is believed that the name may be derived from the Assyrian word *asu*, meaning 'east.' Another possible explanation is that it was originally a local name given to the plains of Ephesus, which ancient Greeks and Romans extended to refer first to Anatolia (contemporary Asia Minor, which is the western extreme of mainland Asia), and then to the known world east of the Mediterranean. When Western explorers reached South and East Asia in early modern times, they extended this label…

Put differently, the space named 'Asia' denotes something different (from the point of view of the Greeks, the Romans, and 'Western explorers') from time to time; what it actually is seems always suspended. The name and its varied meanings are determined by different people in different times living not in the identified space -- and the markers or boundaries are continually shifting.

One may find its beginnings in Aeschylus' play, *The Persians.* The historical tragedy, about the defeat of King Xerxes from Persia in the hands of the Athenians in the Battle of Salamís, was staged for the first time in 472 B.C.

In the play, the word 'Asia' is equal to a land ruled by 'Persian laws,' where people 'carry their tribute' determined by 'a master's necessity.' Asia is a land where the subjects 'prostrate themselves to the ground and adore.'

Needless to say, this is not a purely descriptive narrative. Neither it is, however, the case in which 'Europe…articulates the Orient,' projecting 'Asia' as 'defeated and distant,' as Edward Said suggests.[10] Obviously, Said reads the play as a part of the Orientalist discourse promulgated in 18th century Europe, when 'Europe' was a conglomeration of powers dictating an 'imaginative geography' to the world. As I see it, the play, written by a pre-modern Athenian citizen proud of the democratic tradition of his Greek *polis*,[11] depicts 'Asia' simply as a contrast to the Athenian sense of liberty.

Early in the play, Atossa, Xerxes' mother, asks the chorus of Persian elders about their Athenian adversaries, 'Who is set as shepherd or as lord to oversee the host?' The chorus-leader replies: 'Slaves of no man are they called, nor in subjection to any man.' It is quite clear here that Aeschylus' 'Asia' is more a device of self-salutation than a space imagined and produced by a triumphant 'Europe.'

Said's misreading of *The Persians,* however, illuminates a larger issue: his censure of the general Orientalist representation of the 'Orient'. The view is largely legitimate: the projected image 'Asia' not as a different realm, but a permutable negation – is pervasive, something you can find from Marx's theory on the 'Asiatic mode of production' to blond Flash Gordon, the comic book hero, who perpetually sets himself against the Chinese-looking villain, Emperor Ming, an 'Oriental despot' living somewhere up there in the outer space.[12] In all this, 'Asia' suggests a lack, or worse, a negative Other. Not unlike the geography teacher's proselytizing talk in the first chapter of *Ali and Nino,* this pointed use of adjective can be brutal: Asia is 'reactionary' as it is a contrast to 'progressive Europe.'

In fact, the taxonomic thrust is the undercurrent that carries the novel. When Ali recounts to Nino and her girl-friends the discussion that took place in class and how he had heatedly argued for Baku to remain Asian, he only encounters Nino's rebuke. 'Ali Khan, you are stupid,' she tells him. 'Thank God we are in Europe. If we were in Asia they would have made me wear the veil ages ago and you could not see me.'

The border is clear-cut, as is the dichotomy. In one of the novel's most telling scenes Ali pays a visit to Georgia, where Nino's family lives. The host, a 'European,' invites him to camp in the forest. Ali accepts, but he says nonetheless, 'The world of trees perplexes me, Your Highness…No, I do not love trees.'

The shadow of the woods oppresses him. 'I love simple things: wind, sand and stones,' he says. 'The desert is simple like the thrust of a sword. The wood is complicated like the Gordian knot. I lose my way in the woods, Your Highness.' The host understands. This is probably the difference between East and West, he says. In the West, man finds the woods 'full of questions'; in the East, 'the desert man has but one face, and knows but one truth, and that truth fulfils him.' From the desert comes the fanatic. From the woods, the creator.

It is interesting that Ali does not show even the slightest objection to such a bloated conceit, expressed barefacedly at his expense. In fact, the novel makes him celebrate his 'Asian-ness' almost every day in his life. When he kills Nacharayan, an Armenian friend, by biting his neck, he does

not forget to drive his identity home: 'Yes, Nacharayan, that's how we fight in Asia…with the grip of the grey wolf.'

There is no record that states killing a man by biting his neck is an 'Asian habit,' but as far as Kurban Said is concerned, it scarcely matters. Ali is dead even before the story begins. He is ossified by the logic of pure difference. Yes, he is the novel's narrator, the 'I' in the story. Yet he exists like a beautiful figurine displayed in an antique shop, among carpets, under the shades of the old city or the Tehran harem, surrounded by traditional songs and the Shiite rituals in the month of Muharram. Ali's self-consciously 'Asian' persona is akin to an empty Russian doll to be filled with a replication of faces created by a narcissistic demand to establish an 'ego ideal' something shaped by language.

Essentially, it is the commanding language of 'the woodman' that determines the 'creator' as one who 'comes from the wood.' What prevails is the 'European' symbolic point, with which an individual assumes a set of perspectives from which he or she wants to be viewed.

The volatility of identity

The 'European' symbolic point makes the place putatively named 'Europe' loom high in the mind of 'Asians,' people like Ali, who, even in his choice to put Baku in 'Asia,' admits the inevitability of 'Europe' in the place to which he belongs. Granted, he refuses to be posted in Paris as a Persian diplomat. But he has his own reasons, which he explains to Nino: 'Let's stay in Baku, where Asia and Europe meet.'

To be sure, Ali's city is an imagined meeting space. But once the divide between 'Europe' and 'Asia' is made into a symbol, the space is structured to inhibit the capacity of persons to break through the form that announces their identities. It has all the elements of segregation akin to a racist scheme.

It is not pure coincidence that *Ali and Nino* made fascinating reading in Austria and Germany in the 1930s, when the Nazis, obsessed with the idea of putting the 'Aryan' race in a special compartment, were finding a fertile ground for their doctrine.

Interestingly, the author, using the pseudonym of 'Kurban Said,' had nothing 'Aryan' about him. He had a very colorful biography – one that came to light with the 2005 publication of *The Orientalist,* Tom Reiss' investigation of the life of the true author of *Ali and Nino,* almost 70 years since the novel was first published.[13]

Lev Nussimbaum was born in Baku, Azerbaijan, to a Jewish family of *nouveau riche* oil industrialists in 1905. When he was 13, world history

knocked at the city gate in a violent way. The Bolsheviks, fresh from their victorious revolution in St. Petersburg, came to take over Baku. After Lev's mother committed suicide, his father fled as the Bolsheviks and the forces of the Czar fought over their city. He and Lev were part of a caravan of refugees that travelled through Turkestan, Persia and the Caucasus where they encountered diverse cultures and religions. In 1921 father and son arrived in the cultural melting-pot of Constantinople along with thousands of Russian refugees. Later, the Nussimbaums relocated to Paris and then to Germany, where Lev enrolled at the Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität under the name of 'Essad Bey Nousimbaoum' as his name on the application.

'Nousimbaoum' converted to Islam in August of 1922. No one knows for sure what prompted him to become a Muslim. Reiss suggests that the flights with his father through the Caucasus to escape the spreading horrors of the Russian Revolution nurtured Lev's view of Islam as 'a bastion of heroic resistance in a world of brute force and injustice' According to Reiss, Lev, who identified with Islam and the East when not yet 10, would come to see the Muslim and the Jew united 'in their struggle against the West and its mass violence.'

Reading *Ali and Nino*, remarkable as it presents 'the Asian' or 'Muslim' behavior with a noticable trace of disdain or mockery, it is difficult to say that there is a consistency in this view. Now and then, the novel inserts Muslim misogynic homilies, like when Ali's father gives his son an advice on the absurdity of loving a woman. 'One love one's homeland, or war,' the old prince says.. 'Some men love beautiful carpets, or rare weapons. But – it does not happen, that a man loves a woman'.

In another occasion Kurban Said tells us a derogatory anecdote about the improbable stupidity of Ali's aristocratic uncle who believed, with a sense of satisfaction, that the immolation scene he saw in the opera *L'Africaine* was not a mere stage act but a real punishment inflicted on the leading soprano, 'a very fat woman who sang dreadfully'.

In short, Said's Muslims are often a ludicrous lot. One can hardly discern the author's genuine symphathy towards them. Perhaps, his preference for Islam was dictated more by nostalgia than anything else. It began when, as a child, he would wander along the ramparts of the khan's palace in Baku where he would imagine himself a prince. Baku, or the city of his imagination, allowed him to see himself in a position of beyond the constraints of two different worlds, someone versed in European civilization and yet, like the Azeri Jews he admired, 'always armed' and in oriental dress.

After all, Nussimbaum was not the only Jew in Germany who dressed up like an Arab or espoused a universal interpretation of Islam. A staunch Zionist, Wolfgang von Weisl, was with him writing 'Allah is Great: The Decline and Rise of the Islamic World.'

Another explanation for this position is the need for a protective mask. 'The Orient, or an idea of the Orient, offered a refuge to a man like Nussimbaum, who could not feel safe anywhere in the Western world', so wrote Ian Burumah in his review of *The Orientalist*.[14] 'It was an identity that lent him pride, a certain grandeur'.

At any rate, since his Berlin stay, he began to tell people that he was related to the Emir of Bukhara. He introduced himself as the son of a Muslim patrician father who owned oil wells. He avoided mentioning either his mother or his Jewish background. His friends and acquaintances went along with the charade.

After all, he was not without success. Nussimbaum's travels were formative and enchanting experiences for him. Around 1926, he was known as a writer for the journal *Die Literarische Welt* and gained a reputation as an 'expert on the East.' By the early 1930s he had become a bestselling author in Western Europe writing mainly about contemporary historical and political issues as well as biographies of, among others, Muhammad, Czar Nicholas II and Stalin. He began a romantic relationship the Austrian baroness Elfriede Ehrenfels who did not know his true name and origins.

Later he married an American woman, the daughter of a shoe magnate. The marriage failed. When Hitler rose to power in 1933, Nussimbaum moved briefly to New York City, but returned to Europe two years later. In 1938, his identity as a Jew was revealed, and he fled Nazi-controlled Vienna for Italy.

He had not much left. He offered himself to write Mussolini's biography, but was rebuffed. The most he received was some money to record fascist propaganda in Persian for the Fascist Colonial Service. He was intermittently starving. Starting 1939, he was aided by a Mussolini-era salon hostess who recommended to him *Ali and Nino*, not knowing he was the author.

The man who wrote *Ali and Nino* died in 1942 from the Raynaud's syndrome that gradually killed him. Reiss quotes a sentence, later crossed out, from Nussimbaum's last manuscript: 'The author of this book is dead. He was the victim of an airplane crash that occurred when he wanted to cross the short stretch that separates southern Europe from Asia.'

Nussimbaum seemed to embody the desire to cross that 'short stretch'— and the volatility of identity. As Reiss describes him, he was

simultaneously a Jew, an Oriental, and a German, without inhabiting any one of these identities to the exclusion of the others. He had an ever-shifting series of self-portraits. In many publications during his life time, he appeared in different photographs and in different garbs, often donning a fez or a white turban (Figure 1 and 2).

These personas might serve as a resistance. As Reiss suggests, by moving from one identity to another, Nussimbaum refused to be branded or categorized from 'the outside'. The way he presented himself, as seen from the photographs, acted like a border: something visibly designed to mark difference. It is an identification in the imaginary -- identification being the transformation that takes place when he, as a subject, assumes an image. Here, the role of the gaze is crucial. Despite its immediacy, this gaze, even in a self-portrait, is not without the language of 'the outside'. In other words, the imaginary is latently determined by the symbolic.[15]

This identification with the Other implies a recognition of a master, in the form of language, law, community, or/and the state. As I see it, Nussimbaum's mark of difference, identifiable as 'Oriental,' is tailored to structure an agreement with the words of 'the master'. In the case of Austria and Germany in the 1930s, the words, or the discourse, insisted on regulating difference; hence the labeling of Jews, 'Orientals', and other 'non-Aryan' people. It was a time ripe with nationalistic fervor, stressing the bond between one's racial label with one's land of origin, as words like *Blut (*blood)*, Boden* (soil), and *Heimat* (home or homeland) suggested.

This may explain the force of the ethnic taxonomy in *Ali and Nino* that portrays the life of the leading character as someone faithful to his blood line and profoundly attached to his country of birth and *Heimat.* This may also shed light on Nussimbaum's political stance. In 1931, he joined the German-Russian League Against Bolshevism, the majority of its members were known as Nazis or would-be Nazis. The Nazi propaganda ministry included his works on their list of 'excellent books for German minds.' Nussimbaum was an early admirer of Mussolini, and a defender of the Nazi regime. The 'National Socialist revolution,' he said, 'has saved Europe from a catastrophe.' According to him, the Nazis were the one thing that firmly upheld 'traditional European culture' in confronting 'Bolshevik barbarism.'[16]

In the novel, Ali dies a patriot defending Baku from the Bolsheviks. One can also see him as a defender of 'European culture' in a different way by representing an 'Asiatic' creature, something savage yet attractive, frightening yet amusing, and is therefore a necessary sample of 'them', a negative 'them', in the border between a space named 'Europe' and another

named 'Asia.'

It is precisely such a border that is the site of anxiety – hence Kurban Said's changing personas and Nussimbaum's shifting self-portrait, imaginary or otherwise.

The anxiety is inevitable. All identity is differential and therefore contingent. In the words of Laclau, 'Each identity is what it is only through its difference from all the others', i.e. each identity is both affirmed and negated by that which lies outside it and beyond its control. Thus every identity is 'penetrated by a basic instability and precariousness'; it always contains elements escaping its articulation of itself. Any identity (and a social totality) cannot possibly be fully achieved.[17]

Thus identity becomes a desire; it is something perpetually unfulfilled.

Border as a site of unfulfilment

This reminds me of Groucho Marx.

In one of his memorable quips, the comedian Marx speaks of different emblems of identity: 'I don't have a photograph, but you can have my footprints. They're upstairs in my socks'.

The witticism prompted me to adopt the dichotomy as a pair of metaphors. One is photograph. The other is footprints. I see photograph as an allegory of portrayal. The word 'allegory' comes from Greek *allegorein*, literally 'to say otherwise'. Along these lines, Groucho Marx's notion of photograph suggests a device to represent him for public viewing. But it is basically a misrepresentation.

Photography implies the function of light and the demand for visualization – two crucial components of our predominantly oculocentric culture, of which the earliest expression was articulated by Plato in the cave scene in the *Republic*. In this dialogue, Plato promotes the visual to the level of the cognitive.[18]

The oculocentric leitmotif has brought a wealth of artistic and technological inventions into our lives. Even so, one cannot undermine its imbrications with a long history of power relations, where 'the eye of God', or of the 'Father', or of 'the Leader', as Lefebvre calls it, governs.

A photograph, therefore, as a metaphor of identity, is something ratified by the symbolic order embodied in language, law, community, or/and the state. In other words, it is something fixed by a framing device guarded by the 'Big Other.'

Thus Groucho Marx's jest is a form of resistance: instead of adopting the common use of photograph, he bestows prominence on his hardly

visible footprints ('they are upstairs in my socks') – which are transient traces of mobility. He rejects the 'onslaught of visualization' and the imperative of framing. He pokes at the logic of light.

The logic of light, equivalent to the logic of sight, puts everything under the Other's gaze, brings it into the scope of clarity and knowledge. Knowledge is an attempt to get rid of surprises. It aims for familiarity by letting things emerge in a form in which I can recognize them. 'Light is that through which something is other than myself,' says Emannuel Levinas, 'but already as if it came from me.'[19] Thus this 'something' that signaled difference is no longer truly different.

For that reason, an identity framed as an illuminated 'object' will be captured by a pre-existing set of significations. There is an episode in Franz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks,* when he poignantly describes his experience in being recognized by a white child in the streets of Paris: 'Look, a Negro.' At that moment, he encountered a meaning that he did not make for himself. The meaning was always 'already there, pre-existing, waiting' for him, inscribed in the color of his skin; in short, his appearance sapped, invalidated all his actions. He was, as it were, reduced to a complete object, without the 'ontological resistance' to the colonizing gaze. He had no access to his own common humanity; he was fixed or identified by that gaze.[20]

But there was one thing Fanon forgot: his own feet. Actually he was able to walk out of the scene. His footprints would leave a sign of his revolt against exemplification. But portrayed, imprisoned, and paralyzed by the language of the white child, he, like a photograph, was put for a public viewing, by the way of misrepresentation. The critical point would be if he took it as his self-portrait – and thus put himself in the pursuit of an illusion.

To follow Lacan yet again, the image of a stable, coherent, whole self the child sees in the mirror does not correspond to the real child and is, therefore, impossible to realize. The image is an 'Ideal-I', a fantasy that the child sets up in order to compensate for its sense of lack or loss. The result is split: the mirrored ego is simultaneously itself and someone else. Thus, 'the mental permanence of the I' is its own alienating destination'.[21]
For this reason, a border is necessarily a site of unfulfilment.

Identity as an endless hegemonic struggle

Kurban Said's kind of border continues its complicated and traumatic presence in Orhan Pamuk's novel, *Snow,* published originally in Turkish.[22]

The novel's main character is Ka, a tall, shy, 42-year-old Turk, a bachelor and a poet of some repute. His real name is Kerim Alakuşoğlu, but ever since his school days he has always wanted to be addressed as 'Ka.' One day, after spending 12 years in Germany, he returns to Istanbul when his mother dies. Once in Istanbul, he decides to go to Kars.

It is not exactly clear, even to him, what makes him head for this poor inland city near the Armenian border in the northeast. Raised in Istanbul in a well-to-do family, perhaps he wishes 'to venture at long last into the other world beyond.' Or perhaps there are other reasons, stronger yet no less obscure: the trip is really to find a pretty student friend from his university days, who has since returned home, married, and divorced. He also gives others yet another explanation: he has arrived there as someone working for a newspaper to write about a series of suicides committed by young women in this depressing town.

The novel begins with Ka taking the bus one white afternoon. Snow falls unceasingly, ultimately closing all the roads in Kars. In this town of 80,000 people, Ka meets people, asks questions and gives answers, and is filled with hopes and fears. For the first time after so many years a series of poems 'comes' to him. Kars is a lever between Ka's old and new self.

His new self has, however, a short life. Before the end of the story, the readers are told that he has died in Frankfurt -- murdered, but without explanation. The author, 'Orhan,' steps in; he wants to write about his deceased poet friend. Meanwhile life goes on in Kars, dotted by snippets of memories of those snowy days.

In the end, what we remember most vividly is not the life of the main character, but of Kars, or the story of a Turkey at the border — a border between countries and between history and grand ideals. It is about Turkey in the early 1990s. 'In Kars,' Orhan Pamuk said in an interview, 'you can quite literally feel the sadness that comes from being a part of Europe, and at the same time the sparse, hard-fought very un-European life.'[23]

In the cracks between and beneath this sad contradiction, anomaly becomes commonplace and the extraordinary appears ordinary; Orhan Pamuk tells it all with no attempt to be lyrically captivating. His prose betrays a dry, dark humor, describing in an understated way, for instance, a local newspaper that published stories of events even before they happened, including the dramatic murder on stage of the leading actor.

From such a narrative we also learn of a report that a group of young women wearing Muslim headscarves suddenly committed suicide, one after another, even if there were different versions as to why they did so. We also read that the murdered director of a 'secular' educational institution who

forbade his students to wear headscarves apparently recorded his last conversation with the killer, an 'Islamist' who was still at large. Other unusual things taking place: a military *coup d'etat* and massacre that goes on as though part of a performance of the play *Fatherland of My Headscarf,* while Blue, a young, supposedly dangerous fugitive (whom one police officer calls 'an Islamist terrorist with blood on his hands') ends a secret meeting with can not by announcing a threat nor proposing a conspiracy, but with a naïve story about a warrior called Rüstem.

In Kars, between fact and fiction, between reality and imagination, life covers up the city's wounds. Violence and death occur as though history was dictated from above and destinies are akin to floating snowflakes. Ultimately snow can serve as a parable for the life of this poor city, a city strung by high hopes and despairs over Attaturk's `secularism' and the new 'Islamism' that attack each other and accuse each other of betrayal. Snow is the color white that promises no defilement, and yet it is unable to stay clean; it even freezes itself solid and makes the roads impassable.

There is neither hero nor anti-hero in *Snow;* the novel's major and minor characters evolve through self-preoccupation, hatred, anger, simple-mindedness, or confused sense of pride. Yet each has moments of magnanimity, presented by the narrator with a touch of sympathy.

Perhaps this has something to do with the fact that Pamuk is a Turkish writer growing up in Istanbul, living the ordeal in which all his characters find themselves in. I sense his less sanguine view of 'Europe,' his cagey look at 'Islamism' and his apprehension about the brutal outburst of secular nationalism. With a post-modern sensibility, the narrative opens itself up to irony, inconsistency, unfinished parts, multiple voices, and surprises. It ends with a rather uncertain, melancholic closure: 'As I watched the last snow-covered rooftops and the thin, quivering ribbons of smoke rising from the broken chimneys, I began to cry.' It is as if in Kars, in the border of 'Asia' and 'Europe', the roads were impassable even as the snow melted away.
The lingering melancholy notwithstanding, the anxiety at the border can be intolerably intense. All of the Pamuk's characters: the young religious students, Kadife, Ipek's courageous sister, and even Blue, perpetually find themselves, as Blue puts it, living under the shadow of 'Europe' out of which they want to step.

One particular scene that captures this is when different people opposing the local military take-over 'Islamist youth, Kurdish activists, leftists old and young, and other 'revolutionaries' meet secretly at a hotel called 'Asia.' They all gather to draft a statement initially titled 'An Announcement to the People of Europe about Events in Kars.'

Let me quotes some remarks made during the meeting:

1. '…in Germany, they can spot people from Turkey just by the way they look. There's no avoiding humiliation except by proving at the first opportunity that you think exactly as they do.'

2. 'When a Westerner meets someone from a poor country, the first thing he feels is deep contempt…And the next thing this Westerner thinks is that the poor man's head must be full of all the nonsense that plunged his country into poverty and despair'.

3. 'But we all know what Europe has come to mean…Europe is our future, and the future of our humanity.'

4. 'I have come to this meeting because I wish to prove to the Europeans that in Turkey, too, we have people who believe in common sense and democracy.'

5.. 'We can never be Europeans!'

6. 'Here is what I'd like you to write: I'm proud of the part of me that isn't European. I'm proud of the things in me that the Europeans find childish, cruel and primitive.'

7. 'We're not speaking to Europe…We're speaking to all humanity…The people in Europe are not our friends but our enemies. And it's not because we are *their* enemies – it's because they instinctively despise us.'

There is so much of a sense of 'we' in the meeting, yet there is no sure answer when someone asks, 'Who do you mean, my son, when you say 'we"? One thing is obvious: what constitutes 'we' is the self-perception of being under the gaze of something called 'Europe.' This is the famous Sartrean gaze, something that Fanon's episode quoted earlier movingly describes. From this perspective, the Turks gathering unhappily in Hotel 'Asia' do depend on the recognition of 'Europe' to achieve self-consciousness, yet being the object of the 'Europe's look is experienced as a profound violation. Thus the knowing look of recognition ascertains, as well as governs and limits, their position. It freezes their possibilities. Needless to say, such knowledge is implicated in relations of power.

The issue is not merely of a theoretical nature. 'Europe' has a history that doubles as a chronicle of property and power. 'The space that emerged in Western Europe in the 12th century,' as Lefebvre puts it, 'was the space of accumulation – its birthplace and cradle.'[24]

And yet, precisely because of such an accumulation, 'Europe' internalizes a perpetual 'ought.' Since the time of its imperial exploits, there has always been a fissure between what it is and what it thinks it ought to be. From the ambitions of the Third Reich to the Treaty of Rome of 1957 to the united Europe encompassing over 20 states, it has been driven by a

desire to become a new, and yet an identifiable, entity. The preamble to the EU Constitution proclaims that, 'While remaining proud of their own national identities and history, the peoples of Europe are determined to transcend their former divisions and, united ever more closely, to forge a common destiny.'

Thus, since its transformation into a 'secularized space' in which laws are established, customs and customary exactions replaced by contractual relationships, and the seal of the state sanctified, 'the outcome of the revival of the Logos and the Cosmos,' as Lefebvre describes it,[25] is the narrative of the political.

This reminds me of a piece of myth. In Phoenicia, on a beach in Sidon, so the story goes, there once lived a princess. Her eyes were large and bright (*europos,* from *eurys* and *ops,* is sometimes supposed to mean either `large-eyed' or 'broad-faced'). Enchanted by this creature, Zeus, the king of gods, changed himself into a bull, whereupon the god Eros put her on his back and the beast dived into the sea, carrying her off to Crete. Roberto Calasso describes the incident in his strange and powerful novel, *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony:* 'Europa, meantime, could see no end to this crazy sea crossing. But she guessed what would happen to her when they hit the land again. And she shouted to wind and water: 'Tell my father Europe has been carried off by a bull – my kidnapper, my sailor, my future bedmate, I imagine….'[26]

Meanwhile, on the other side of the island, the princess' five brothers went in pursuit of their lost sister. At every corner of the earth they asked, 'Where is Europa?'

No one knew, notwithstanding Europa had had a strange dream shortly before dawn. She was caught between two women who was fighting violently over her; one was Asia, the other was the land facing her, and she had no name. Calasso tells us: 'And in the end it was the stranger whose powerful hands dragged her off.'[27]

Later, one of her five brothers arrived in Delphi. He inquired as to Europa's whereabouts to the oracle who in return told him, 'You will never find her. But follow a cow, push it unceasingly. Where it stops, you must found a city.'

From this story, it seems that `Europe' is a never-ending search, an unfinished discursive formation. It is the story not of a photograph, but of footprints, to use Groucho Marx's dichotomy. The founding of the city, which is an outcome of the imposed Logos and Cosmos, is always tentative. The dispute whether Turkey can be part of 'Europe' is indicative of the political nature of the on-going formation. Despite the workings of shared

myths, rituals, iconography, and narratives, no 'imagined community' is universally imagined. Ultimately it is the outcome of an endless hegemonic struggle.

Hence the pain and frustration of the people gathering in the old Hotel 'Asia'. Torn between a desire for recognition and a sense of rejection by 'Europe,' they have a woefully limited access to the site that determines what 'Europe' is. Meanwhile, it is interesting to note that Pamuk chooses to call the hotel 'Asia', perhaps to suggest a site of differently motivated sojourns, a provisional assembly, and always somebody else's conveniently available space. It has an 'outside' which is 'constitutive' an outside that supports as well as alters it – even though this outside needs its own definition, and one that will never be completely successful.

One's History as Footprints

What makes *Snow* a moving account of 'Asia' is the way the narrative, in its pursuit of coherence, always breaks into small, unfinished, stories. In contrast, *Ali and Nino* betrays the solidity of an indisputable statement. Ali's notion of 'Asia' suggests a history defined by a will, or perhaps a desire. It is a geography of choice. 'Sir, I…would rather stay in Asia.' he says.

Both the decision and the choice are by no means a leap into the unknown. For Ali and for the rest of us, circumscribed by the language of national or ethnic particularism, ethnic or national identity is not a matter of individual construction. It is neither attainable (hence the word 'identification')[28], nor is it entirely an autobiographical theme inventing, instead of representing, 'the self.' Often it is like an impulse that may emerge from somewhere deep in the political unconscious.

Thus is my own rootedness not altogether transparent to me. I am attached to it as something I cannot break away from, but it is also something that cannot completely define me. Only gradually I reinforce it. After all, borders and places named are precarious socio-symbolic closures struggling to overcome their own impossibility. But precisely because of that, there is a sense of unsettledness in my act of self-inscription.

The problem with Kurban Said's characters is that they seem to be free from it. They are made so committed to an idea of 'difference,' but so enthralled by their respective rootedness, that their attitude towards the other is marked almost by total indifference. The swift killing of the Armenian friend, despite his good service to Ali (the Armenian was the one who made Ali acceptable to Nino's family), comes off naturally as a violent expression of such indifference. While Orhan Pamuk's Ka is a tragic

character split between having too many and too few roots at the same time, Ali resembles something of a deeply planted tree. But we are not trees, as Levinas says.

The worship of *Blut und Boden* ('Blood and Soil') at the core of German nationalism, as well as 'the Heideggerian world and the superstitions surrounding the Place', have probably prompted Levinas to warn us of the danger of 'one's implementation in a landscape, one's attachment to Place, without which the universe would become insignificant and would scarcely exist.' Because, as he sees it, it will inevitably lead to the 'splitting of humanity into natives and strangers.'[29]

Hence his veneration of 'the human face' that shines 'in all its nudity'.[30] To be sure, such a position may be problematic; it is almost the equivalent of putting people like you and me on a pedestal of abstraction. But it is a legitimate response to a world navigating its way between the myths of globalization and various forms of sectarian bigotry. It is a way to reappraise the border as a limiting sign and yet simultaneously a frontier.

A frontier is an invitation; it opens the possibility of a journey to the unknown, to a 'heterotopical' places, 'places of sorcery and madness', 'places which were fascinating but tabooed', places where the 'onslaught of visualization' and its collusion with 'abstraction, geometry and logic', and also with 'authority'[32], do not always prevail. In other words, it is a the beginning of one's history as footprints.

End Notes

1. Lefebvre, Henri, *The Production of Space*, translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford, U.K. and Cambridge, USA: Blackwell, 1977), p. 118.
2. Lefebvre, p.261.
3. Lefebvre, p 262..
4. Lacan J., *Écrits: a selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan, (London: Routledge, 1977), p.2
5. The *Ali and Nino* version I am using was published by Anchor Books in October 2000. The novel was rediscovered for the first time in a second-hand bookstore in the ruins of post-war Berlin, forgotten during the turmoil of the Second World War. Jenia Gramman, who found it, translated it into English, and had it published in 1970.

Paul Theroux wrote a review about it, 'enthusiastically.' He also wrote an afterword for the 2000 edition.

6. Theroux, Paul, 'Afterword to the Anchor Edition,' in *Ali and Nino*, p. 277.
7. *Al Ahram,* 16-22 June 2005.
8. *Denver Post,* 26 May 2005.
9. Lefebvre, p. 141.
10. See *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, A Division of Random House, 1979), p. 57.
11. For a discussion from this angle, see Anthony J. Podlecki, 'Polis and Monarch in Early Attic Tragedy', in Euben, J. Peter, (ed.), *Greek Tragedy and Political Theory* (Berkeley, Long Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1986), p. 78, 81.
12. In a commentary on Flash Gordon, a comic book created by Alex Raymond in 1934, Edouard François writes in an essay on Planet Mongo: '..ce n'est sûrement pas pour rien qu'Alex Raymond a nommé la planète Mongo, son maitre suprême Ming, et qu'il a doté ses habitants d'une peau jaune et d'un faciès asiatique'. To François, Ming's rule in this imaginary planet is a 'tyrannie orientale', noticeable for its 'cruel, pitiless, cunning, crafty, and showy' quality. See Edouard François, 'La Planete Mongo, Peuplement, société, évolution', in Alex Raymond, *Flash Gordon, Le Tyran de Mongo,* (Neuilly-sur-Seine: Dargaud Ēditeur, 1980), pp. 44-46.
13. Reiss, Tom, *The Orientalist: Solving the mystery of a strange and dangerous life* (New York: Random House, 2005). All other quotations attributed to Reiss are from the book.
14. See Buruma, Ian, 'Between Two Worlds,' *The New York Review of Books,* Vol. 52, No. 10, June 9, 2005.
15. Lacan, *Écrits,* p. 308: 'the symbolic dominates the imaginary'.
16. As quoted in Buruma, 'Between Two Worlds'.
17. Laclau, Ernesto, *Emancipation(s)*. (London: Verso, 1996) p. 52. Idem, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*. (London: Verso, 1990), p.109.
18. Stoichita, Victor I., *A Short History of Shadow*, (London: Redaktion Books, 1997), p.22.. According to Stoichita, by describing the shadow thrown by fire on the wall of the cave as a stage furthest away from the truth, Plato projected it as 'a fundamental negativity that, in the history of Western representation, was never to be abandoned altogether'. (p. 25).

19. Levinas, Emannuel, *Time and the Other*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987), p.64.
20. Fanon, Franz, *Black Skin, White Masks* (London: Pluto Press, 1952-1986). One can discern the logic of sight in Fanon's words, suggesting he had no access to his own common humanity, since he was fixed by 'the movements, the attitudes, the glances of the other' just as a 'chemical solution is fixed by a dye.' (p. 109f, 110, 132, 134, 214).
21. Lacan, p.2.
22. The version I use is an English translation by Maureen Freely (Faber & Faber, 2004)
23. In an interview with Jörg Lau, *Die Zeit,* 14 April, 2005.
24. Lefebvre, p. 263.
25. Idem.
26. See Calasso, Roberto, *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony*, translated by Tim Parks (New York: Vintage International, Vintage Books, 1994), p. 3.
27. Calasso, op. cit, p. 5.
28. Laclau, Ernesto, (ed.) *The Making of Political Identities*, (London, New York: Verso, 1994), p.3.
29. *Difficult Freedom. Essays on Judaism*, trans.Seán Hand (London: Athlone Press, 1990); pp. 232-233.
30. *Difficult Freedom.* See also *Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed. Adriaan T. Peperzak, et al. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996) p. 54.
31. Lefebvre, p. 263.
32. Lefebvre, p. 261.

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